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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 STATE 001633

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: CASC PTER ASEC ML

SUBJECT: TRAVEL ALERT - MALI

¶1. This Travel Alert is being issued to alert U.S. citizens of a kidnapping threat against Westerners who attend the "Festival in the Desert" at Essakane (65 kilometres north of Timbuktu) from January 8-10, and to reiterate that visitors should avoid northern Mali, including Essakane and Essouk (500 kilometers north east of Timbuktu) where the "Sahara Nights" festival is held. This replaces the Travel Alert for Mali issued on December 10, 2008 to update information on areas of concern, and to strongly urge U.S. citizens against travel to northern Mali. It expires on April 15, 2009.

¶2. Because of recent armed conflicts, kidnappings, armed robberies, and the continued presence of Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Department of State strongly urges that U.S. citizens avoid all travel to northern Mali. AQIM has been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States. The presence of AQIM and Tuareg rebel groups in northern Mali presents serious potential dangers to travelers.

¶3. Areas of particular concern include the Mali-Niger, Mali-Algeria, and Mali-Mauritania borders, the Kidal region, and areas north of Timbuktu, including Essakane. The Department of State has information that Westerners attending Timbuktu's Festival in the Desert at Essakane, scheduled for January 8-10, 2009, may be targeted for kidnapping.

¶4. Travelers in Mali should be aware that visits by U.S. government employees to Timbuktu, the region of Kidal, and areas to the north and east of the town of Gao, must be approved by the Embassy's Chief of Mission due to security concerns. Individuals traveling north of Timbuktu or to the region of Kidal often travel with Malian military escorts. However, an August 2007 attack by Tuareg rebels on a convoy escorted by Malian military personnel illustrates that this does not ensure safety.

¶5. While the government of Mali is working to strengthen security in northern Mali and achieve a peaceful settlement with Tuareg rebels, northern Mali remains unstable. On December 20, 2008, Tuareg rebels attacked the Malian military base in Nampala, the northernmost town in the central region of Segou. Subsequent security incidents involving Tuareg rebels occurred near the towns of Nara, Goumbou, and Mouridah in the region of Koulikoro on December 24-27. On October 31, 2008, in northern Mali, AQIM freed two Austrian tourists kidnapped in Tunisia eight months earlier. On October 16, 2008, bandits in the Kidal region of Mali carjacked two vehicles belonging to the International Committee for the Red Cross. Disparate Tuareg rebel groups attacked Malian military units in Tessalit in July 2008, in Abeibara in May 2008, and in Tinzawaten and Bourghessa in March ¶2008. On January 3, 2008, four Italians were robbed at gunpoint near Araouane, Mali, 150 miles north of Timbuktu by assailants whose affiliation remains unknown.

¶6. In September 2007, armed rebels attacked the Malian military garrison at Tinzawaten. On August 30, 2007, a truck transporting civilians from Algeria to Tinzawaten, Mali, hit a landmine, killing at least 14 people. On August 26-27, 2007, Tuareg dissidents attacked and kidnapped civilian and military convoys near the Mali-Niger border.

¶7. All American citizens residing or traveling in Mali are urged to register with the Department of State or the U.S. Embassy through the State Department's travel registration website, <https://travelregistration.state.gov>. By registering, American citizens make it easier for the Embassy to contact them in case of emergency. The U.S. Embassy is located at ACI 2000 at Rue 243, Porte 297. The Embassy's

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mailing address is B.P. 34, Bamako, Mali. The telephone number is (223) 2070-2300. The consular fax number is (223) 2070-2340. The Embassy webpage is <http://mali.usembassy.gov>.

¶8. Updated information on travel and security in Mali may be obtained from the Department of State by calling 1-888-407-4747 toll-free within the United States and Canada, or, for callers outside of the United States and Canada, on a regular toll line at 1-202-501-4444. For further information, please consult the Country Specific Information for Mali and the Worldwide Caution, which are available on the Bureau of Consular Affairs Internet website at <http://travel.state.gov>.

¶9. Minimize considered.

RICE